

# Professional socialization and prudence strategies

## The use of Facebook groups by social workers

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### Abstract

This article explores the increasing use of social media, particularly Facebook groups, by social workers for professional socialization and support. Social media platforms are used individually to promote services and develop professional identities, and collectively for knowledge sharing, mutual support, and critical reflection. The study focuses on Quebec social workers, examining their use of Facebook groups to connect, share experiences, and reduce work-related stress. Data were collected from a private Facebook group, posts within the group, and interviews with 14 social workers. The analysis identified three main action logics behind group usage: integration (community belonging), utility (finding tools and information), and subjectivation (questioning practices) (Jauréguiberry & Proulx, 2011). The study found that social workers use these groups primarily outside working hours for professional practice discussions, personal opinions, social mobilization, and job-related posts. Prudence emerged as a key theme, with participants exercising caution to protect their psychological well-being and professional reputation. Facebook groups serve as important spaces for professional socialization, offering support and resources while requiring careful navigation to avoid potential risks.

Keywords: Social Workers; Social Media; Prudence; Facebook

### 1. Introduction

While already ubiquitous in our personal lives, social media is increasingly occupying a significant place in the professional field. Indeed, they seem to be increasingly used, particularly in professional socialization processes (Lemay et al., 2023). Some professionals use them for individual purposes, either to promote their services, develop their professional identity, or to find tools and information to enhance their own practices (Adedoyin, 2016; Magogeat, 2019; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Furthermore, social

media platforms appear to be equally common in collective professional use (Lemay et al., 2023). These platforms can serve as conducive spaces for knowledge development, critical reflections, professional mutual support, sharing of experiences, etc. (Gandy-Guedes et al., 2016; Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Ruan et al., 2020).

The use of these social media platforms is currently present across various disciplines, ranging from management and education to healthcare professions (Lemay et al., 2023). However, what do we know about these uses in the field of social work? Research on social media and social work is quite diverse. Some have examined the use of social media by social workers as a tool for promoting the profession and their services (Adedoyin, 2016), or as a tool for exploring the profession, for example, ethical issues by students in the field (Alharbi et al., 2020; Chan, 2015; Reamer, 2015). Others have considered the use of social media as intervention tools (Lopez & Kirwan, 2023; Oliver et al., 2015), whether it is group intervention (Lopez & Kirwan, 2023), collective intervention related to community development (LaMendola & Ballantyne, 2023), mobilization (Seller & Herrera Gutierrez, 2023), or interventions of various types, for example, in the context of a health crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chaves-Montero, 2023; La Rose, 2023). A final research topic, more closely related to the theme of this article, is the use of support groups on social media by social workers (Gandy-Guedes et al., 2016). In this article, the authors show that informal groups on Facebook can enable social workers to band together, exchange ideas and, above all, reduce the stress associated with their work. These groups can become important professional and emotional support spaces. Although such groups are very popular in Quebec, especially on the Facebook platform (Lemay, et al., forthcoming), there are few articles on the subject at present.

Drawing on an article describing the extent of exchange groups among social workers on the Facebook platform (Lemay et al., forthcoming), this article will address the following question: What are the meanings behind the uses of exchange groups among peers by social workers in Quebec? To answer this question, this article has two objectives: 1) to describe the uses of these peer exchange groups by social workers; and 2) to understand the meanings of these uses by social workers.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Data collection

The data corpus for this research is taken from three different sources: a Facebook group, the posts within that group, and the individuals who are members of it and other groups related to social work. Firstly, we selected a private Facebook group focused on social work in Quebec, reserved for professionals and students in the field<sup>1</sup>. The chosen group boasts several thousand members and dozens of daily posts. Regarding posts, due to the group's high activity, we analyzed the content from November 2022 to February 2023. The collected data for analysis included the post title, content, date and time of posting, number of reactions, number of comments, and the URL to the post (to find it again if needed). The data were then transferred to an Excel document for analysis. These observations helped illustrate the most frequently discussed topics within the group and address Objective 1.

Lastly, we recruited 14 professionals or aspiring professionals in social work for a self-guided tour of their usage of social work groups of which they are members. This guided tour unfolded in two stages: 1) a 60-minute semi-directed interview to understand their usage of these groups and 2) a guided tour of their activity traces on these groups to comprehend the context and meaning attributed to their active participation. More specifically, each participant explored the history of their activities (publications, comments, reactions, etc.) in each of the groups of which they are a member, while commenting on them. These guided tours allowed us to address Objectives 1 and 2 of the project.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to facilitate the reading of this article and since social work is currently a profession predominantly occupied by women, we allow ourselves to feminize the text. The feminine form here represents all genders.

A recruitment poster was posted on various Facebook groups and networking platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). The participant selection criteria were minimal. They simply had to: 1) identify as social workers (some professionals do not hold the official title of social worker, such as those working in community organizations), and/or be studying social work; and 2) be a member of at least one social work-related group or page. Recruitment proved challenging, and despite multiple follow-up attempts over several months, the final sample size (14 participants) was determined by the low response rate rather than by deliberate choice. Several hypotheses may shed light on why we were only able to recruit 14 participants. The first relates to the high volume of daily posts in these groups. It is possible that few people actually saw our recruitment post, which may have been lost among the many daily publications. If we were to repeat the process, we could ask the group administrators to pin the post in order to keep it visible for a longer period. Moreover, group members may not have felt directly concerned by the call for participation, perhaps assuming that one needed to be highly active in the groups to take part. One way to address this issue would have been to clearly state on the flyer that even less active members were welcome to participate.

## **2.2 Data analysis**

The collected data were analyzed in a semi-inductive manner. An inductive thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2003) was conducted on the analysis of the publications and interview to address Objective 1 and partly Objective 2, allowing the data to speak for themselves in defining codes. These data were then organized and presented to address the objectives. Finally, using the concept of the three action logics (Jauréguiberry & Proulx, 2011), we conducted a deductive analysis to better understand the meaning behind the uses of social media groups by social workers. The authors suggest that there are three action logics behind digital usage: 1) a logic of integration, where the user primarily seeks to create connections and develop a sense of community belonging; 2) an utilitarian logic, where the user seeks personal gain (tools, information, products, etc.); and 3) a logic of subjectivation, where the user primarily seeks to distance themselves and question their own existence (Jauréguiberry & Proulx, 2015). We will analyze the types of usage based on those three action logics: integration, utility, and subjectivation.

This study, of course, has certain limitations. First, it was difficult to analyze with the same level of precision activities that leave no digital trace, such as reading posts without reacting to them. That being said, we asked participants to describe what they do on the page, which allowed us to still gather some information about these non-visible forms of engagement. Furthermore, since recruitment was conducted directly through the groups, we were unable to reach social workers for whom participation in these groups may have had a negative impact on their professional trajectory, as they were no longer present in these spaces at the time of recruitment. If we were to conduct the study again, we would consider recruiting through other platforms, or even by posting flyers in schools and workplaces.

## **2.3 Ethical considerations**

Research involving human subjects raises many ethical questions, and when social media use is added to the mix, even more arise. These issues concern aspects of confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, and the distinction between private and public life. Thus, to mitigate these issues and especially the risk of identification, we decided, among other measures, not to publish any participant names, group and/or page names. Note that to respect those requirements no verbatim of the observed publications will be presented to illustrate the results below. However, we will use certain direct quotations from the interviews conducted with the participants, while ensuring strict anonymity. The project received approval from the ethics and research committee of the Université de Montréal.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Socio-demographics of participants

We conducted interviews with 14 social workers and/or social work students (n=3). More than half (n=9) of the participants were between 25 and 35 years old. The others were predominantly over 35 years old. We did not observe major differences in group usage based on the age of the participants, whether in terms of frequency of consultation or platforms used. Of the 14 participants, only one was studying full-time, and two were in training in addition to working as social workers in the field. Many have diverse backgrounds, meaning they have not always followed a strictly social work professional path. Furthermore, they do not all work in the same setting, but the vast majority work in the public sector. A few have private practices, but none work in the community sector, which is noteworthy.

Despite their differences, what unites these participants? They generally joined the groups for reasons of belonging to values and the profession, or to improve their professional practices at the beginning of their careers in a new setting, by meeting other social workers and asking them questions. The common thread is thus the aspect of professional socialization. They all joined to connect with other social workers, whether to mobilize, improve their interventions, or simply participate in sharing experiences. Therefore, the motivation to join an unofficial and online professional collective, not directly linked to their workplace, appears to be central to the meaning of their participation.

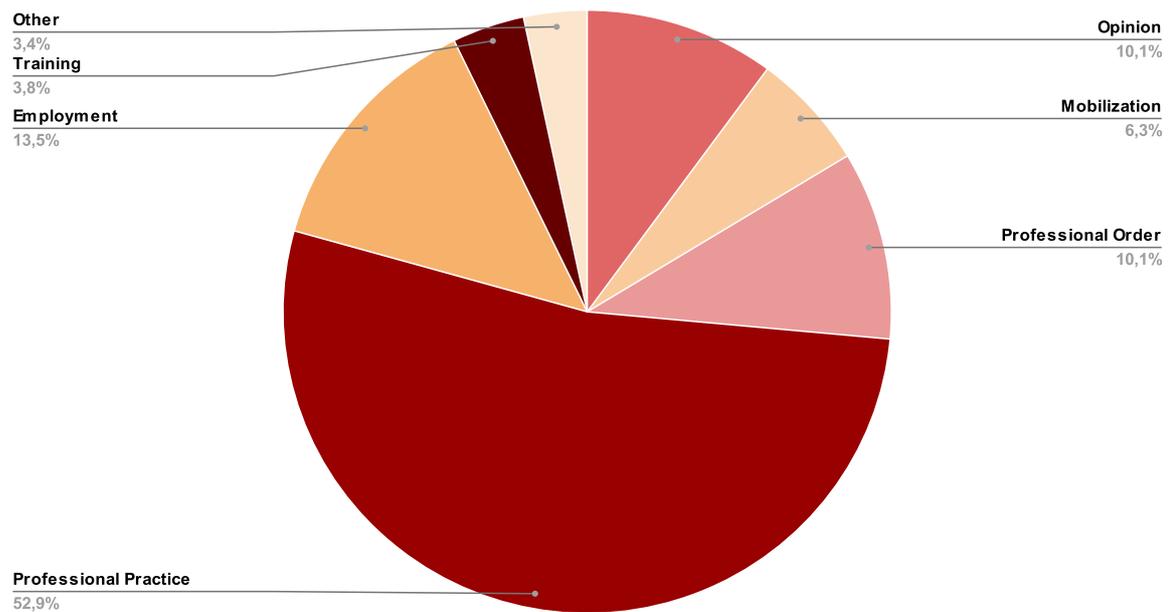
#### 3.2 Objective 1: Describing the uses of peer exchange groups by social workers

##### 3.2.1 According to the interviews

All participants mentioned that their use of social networking sites related to social work is primarily embodied through groups on Facebook. Their more personal uses, which are not related to social work, are carried out on platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, Bereal, etc. The different Facebook groups they are members for professional use are mostly of the "private" type, as is the case for the group that served as the basis for our observations in this project. Although most of the groups identified by the participants are exclusively reserved for social workers and students in the field, several participants also mentioned being part of interdisciplinary groups, the common thread of which is usually a specific workplace. For example, a social worker might be part of a group focused on physical rehabilitation intervention, where they would interact with doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc. Furthermore, the groups reserved for social workers named by the participants either include social workers from all backgrounds and regions or social workers from a specific workplace (e.g., child protection) and/or a particular region. Regarding social workers' participation in these groups, participants believe it is more passive, often limited to reading posts. This participation almost always occurs outside of working hours and at a frequency of several times a week. The uses that social workers have for these groups are therefore varied. Each participant is part of several groups, with different goals and target audiences. Some aim to share intervention techniques, others deal with specific issues, or offer a space for informal exchange and support.

##### 3.2.2 According to observations of posts

To gain a more precise understanding of the uses of such groups by social workers, we analyzed the posts in the chosen group through non-participant observation, focusing on the topics addressed by the users. Thus, we identified seven main subjects: 1) professional practice; 2) personal opinion on a topic related to social work; 3) social mobilization; 4) the Professional Order of Social Workers; 5) social work education; 6) job offers and job searches; and 7) other posts, which are of a personal nature and do not fit into the other subjects. Of these seven subjects, professional practice represents more than 50% of the posts.



**Graph 1.** Topics of Posts in the Observed Group

This theme is divided into two categories: sharing (of tools, practice tips, training, or events) and requests (questions on a theme, a case, or a particular work environment, sharing of experiences and/or tools). The last is the requests that represent the majority (75%) of posts related to professional practice. The most common were questions about a work environment or a specific theme. For example, "Does anyone work in a nursing home and could answer a few questions?" or "I'm looking for a social worker specializing in the autism spectrum, I have a few questions for them."

### **3.3 Objective 2: Understanding the meanings behind these uses for social workers**

To understand the meanings behind the use of groups by social workers, we questioned them and analyzed their responses using the theory of action logics presented by Jauréguiberry and Proulx (2015). Jauréguiberry and Proulx (2015) explain that studies focusing on user experience have shown that there are three underlying logics of action behind digital practices: (1) an integration logic, where use is driven by a desire to develop a sense of belonging by remaining constantly connected; (2) a utilitarian logic, where use is oriented toward achieving some form of gain or efficiency; and (3) a subjectivation logic, where use serves purposes of autonomy and critical distance, allowing individuals to explore the meaning of their existence. These logics are not mutually exclusive. A single individual may mobilize multiple logics within the same experience or shift between them depending on the context (e.g., utilitarian use at work and integration use at home). We chose to base part of our analysis on this theoretical framework because our focus is precisely on the experience of social workers within these groups, and it offered a useful lens to explore the various dimensions of that experience.

#### **3.3.1 The action logics behind these uses**

All three action logics seem to be equally present. Moreover, it is rare for a group to follow only one action logic. Uses often involve at least two different logics.

The first action logic, **integration**, provides an initial explanation for the meaning of these group uses by social workers. Indeed, participants mentioned being part of these groups to find a sense of belonging,

a community that understands the issues they face daily and with whom they can share laughter, frustrations, and experiences.

“I think it really helps just to let some of the stress out. It also helps build a kind of support network. When you're going through something and you think, ‘This doesn't make any sense,’ and then you see lots of people commenting, saying they relate—you know, it creates this sense of solidarity, and you feel less alone (translated from french)”(4).

This action logic was very present among social workers who work alone or in small settings. For many, these groups are spaces where they feel understood, where they can share their difficulties, but also their successes, with peers who will understand them.

The second action logic, **utility**, was often reported by the participants. Indeed, they mentioned using these groups to find answers to their questions related to social work, to share or find tools and information for their practice, to recruit new colleagues, and sometimes even to find a form of clinical supervision (especially when it is not available in their workplace).

“Some people just read and soak up a lot of information—they're learning things. They don't necessarily comment, but as soon as there's information being shared—whether it's clinical knowledge, training opportunities, updates about the professional order, or news about a new government program—well, that helps meet their need for information (Translated from french)” (8)

Although our observations showed that the majority of posts aimed to ask or share something, the respondents placed this logic on par with the other two. We could explain this distinction by the fact that the 14 respondents were not the authors of any of the 247 posts we observed. We could hypothesize that members with a more active participation on these groups (posting, commenting, reacting) perceive these groups in a more utilitarian way, and that simply was not the case for our respondents.

The third logic, **subjectivation**, was also visible in the discourses of our participants. In this sense, they said they were part of these groups to be able to question their own intervention practices and social work in general. Even though their participation remains rather passive, reading posts alone still leads social workers to question their practices and their ethical positioning.

“I read the posts, but I don't get involved—I never really jump in. But it does make me reflect, like, on my own practice. Like, is it okay when I say this? Or, oh, I didn't know that was considered oppressive by that community. So yeah, sometimes it really makes me think about my practice, especially about how I express myself (translated from french).” (12)

For many, these groups are conducive spaces for debates and questioning. It is also in this action logic that social workers will use social networking sites to mobilize members and encourage them to participate in various events (related to debates). Some months are more active for this action logic, especially when significant events occur. We could think of media coverage following tragic events involving social workers, or simply every year during the renewal of the professional order licenses.

### 3.3.2 Evolution of uses

During the interviews, we noticed a distinction between what initially motivated participants to become members of certain groups and what motivates them to continue participating today. Indeed, they mentioned that the needs these groups addressed have evolved with their professional journey. When they were students, these groups primarily addressed a need for mobilization, advocacy, and defense of the profession. When they entered the workforce, this need transformed into something more practical and useful, where social workers could find tools and professional advice to start their careers on the right foot. Subsequently, during difficulties experienced in their workplace, these groups served more to share their personal experiences with a community that also faced these challenges. Finally, during a job change or a period of staffing shortages, these groups could be a good platform to recruit and find a new work environment.

Almost all participants mentioned some form of evolution in their use of exchange groups. Indeed, if their initial motivation to join these groups often involved obtaining answers to questions they had, their

motivation to stay in these groups today has evolved. In this sense, participants mentioned being motivated to participate in these groups to potentially help colleagues, either by supporting them in their reflections, emotions, or by sharing sought-after information and tools. Thus, their motivation has mostly shifted from a utilitarian logic, aimed at obtaining information, to an integration logic, more focused on helping others. The sense of community building, sharing knowledge, has therefore taken precedence over individual needs.

### 3.3.3 *Why choose the digital space?*

To deepen our understanding of the meaning behind the usage of these groups by social workers, we asked our participants to explain if online groups offered them something different than in-person meetings. All participants mentioned that the digital realm brought very interesting elements that would be impossible to replicate in person, such as the breadth of the number of people/opinions reached, the speed of communication, the overcoming of geographical and temporal barriers, the possibility of regrouping together outside the walls of the organization and of being in the profession without being in the workplace, etc. That being said, several also mentioned a "yes, but" perspective, meaning,

"Some people post a lot, but it's not like being in a real-life group where there's a leader saying, 'Hey, there's a protest at this time, let's all meet up.' Social media is so broad, it just feels impersonal. Me, I won't go to a protest unless someone I know asks me to go with them (translated from french)" (1).

This "yes, but" perspective seems to be particularly present when it comes to a logic of subjectivation, of questioning. That is, this uncertainty about the potential of the digital realm only seems to arise when questioning participants about concrete social changes, about questioning the profession. For all questions related to utilitarian and integration logics, the digital realm seems to be a perfect medium, even better suited than the offline world. Finally, we asked our participants if they thought it was important for social workers to be part of these groups. Most of them confirmed that they believed it was important for social workers to be part of these groups, mainly to stay informed, but above all to create contact and a supportive community of belonging. This response leads us to question the presence of such offline communities. It is not possible to assert that these do not exist, however, it would be reasonable to argue that these online communities are an important addition to the offline local solidarities already in place.

That being said, regarding the question of the importance of being part of these groups for social workers, the participants told us that it was equally important for this to be done while respecting their limits of involvement and their needs. These groups should allow them to stay informed about current issues, to address their questions, but should not be a burden of work, as all this is done outside of working hours. It is in this logic that several participants reported exercising caution in their participation in these groups.

## 4. Cross-cutting analysis - The prudence stance

Indeed, the analysis reveals the prominence of prudence on social networking sites (SNS) as a limit to the previously identified action logics. This theme serves to somewhat mitigate the strictly emancipatory and libertarian representation of social networks, as well as those depicting them as sites of violence, of the return of the repressed, etc. We did not find a definition of the concept of online prudence in the existing literature. We therefore propose a definition that brings together various elements found in the literature and that resonate with the experiences shared by our participants. Thus, for us, prudence in digital environments refers to the ability to anticipate the potential negative consequences of one's online actions (Koonin, 2013). It involves risk assessment, managing exposure to information (Zhang et al., 2024), and critical reflection before posting or engaging (Weijs et al., 2019). It is a vigilant stance aimed at preventing potential harm associated with platform use (Kamal et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Prudence emerges as a strategy for distancing oneself from both of these archetypes. This is not about prudence regarding confidentiality or the accuracy of information found in these groups, but rather about

professional risks, risks to their psychological health, and the strategies some adopt to avoid them. These risks and strategies will be further developed below. We did not initially plan to inquire about this subject, but almost all participants spontaneously broached the topic. Therefore, we attempted to conceptualize this prudence. The following illustration presents the reasons/motivations behind this prudence and the strategies of prudence (Figure 1).

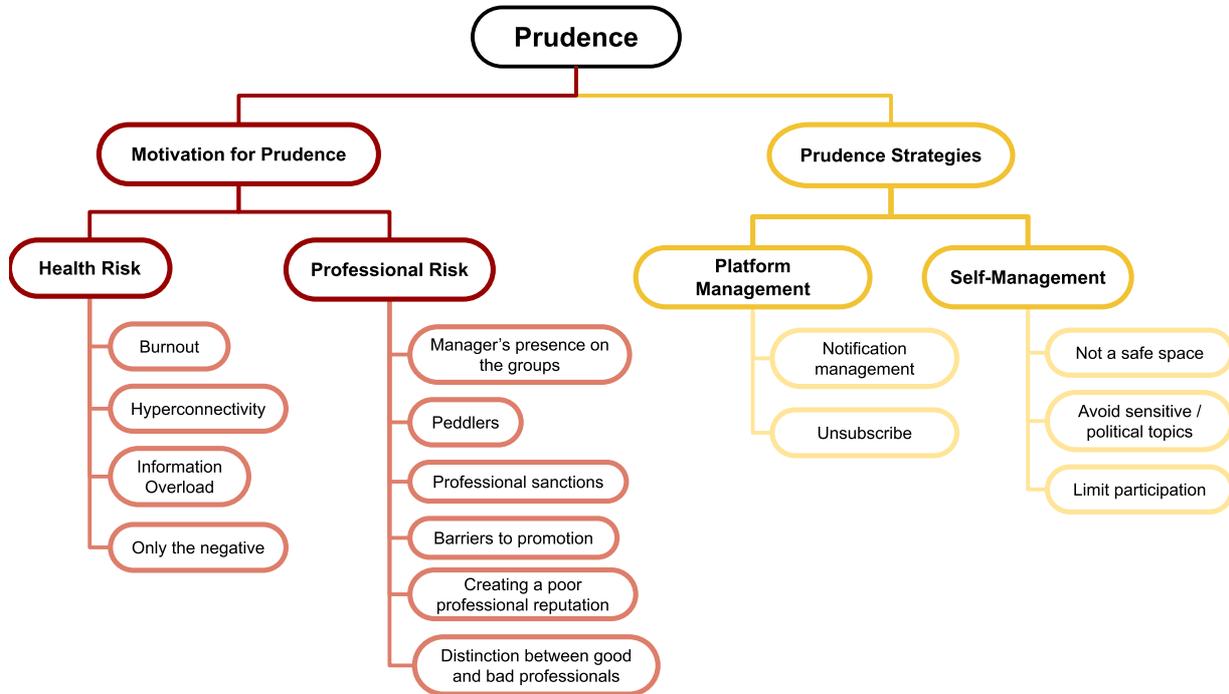


Figure 1. Motivations and strategies for prudence

#### 4.1 Motivations for prudence

##### 4.1.1 Health risk

The first reason for this prudence is the potential health risks of participation in certain groups. In this regard, participants were mainly concerned about their psychological well-being. For some participants, this kind of group can become quite negative in the content shared, meaning that there are often posts aimed at criticism, sometimes without nuance, or sharing negative experiences.

“And it’s not really helpful because it’s mostly complaints about structural issues. It doesn’t really add much, since we all know—we all know we’re stuck in a messed-up system. We all know the healthcare system is falling apart, we all know the new public management is total bullshit. But after that, since there’s no real solution, there’s nothing concrete (translated from french)” (1)

While for some, such posts may have a positive effect by stimulating the advocacy and mobilization nature of social work, for others, it can have a demoralizing, demobilizing, or even exhausting effect, not to mention the risk of being drawn into controversy. Indeed, some participants confided that the overload of "negativity" in these groups was one of the reasons they were decreasing their participation more and more. It is worth noting that not all groups were targeted by this risk, such as groups whose main purpose is to lighten the mood or show self-deprecation by posting humorous memes.

While this surplus of negative statements can contribute to professional exhaustion, especially when combined with difficult working conditions, it is not necessarily the only source. Participants also mentioned a risk of information overload, as well as the feeling of always needing to be connected

(hyperconnectivity). In fact, since they all use their personal Facebook accounts, they are constantly exposed to social work-related posts in their personal time and space. While most simply report ignoring them, for others, simply seeing them in their newsfeed can be exhausting. Thus, the need to protect oneself against overexposure to posts whose topics can be perceived as negative, redundant, or too burdensome to handle, is one of the reasons why participants exercise caution in their choice of group and in the form their participation takes.

#### *4.1.2 Professional risks*

This second motivation behind the participants' prudence was by far the most mentioned during the interviews. By professional risks, they mean all the dangers to participants' professional careers. In this regard, they mentioned not actively participating in online discussions, fearing sanctions in their workplace, or even hindering promotion opportunities. Some cite, for example, the risk of creating a poor professional reputation among other workers or managers, partners from other disciplines or organizations, and future employers. These fears do not come out of nowhere. Indeed, the social workers interviewed explain their prudence by the fact that these groups are often followed by several thousand members and it is impossible to know who really sees the posts. Thus, many reported that managers are also on these groups and that in the past, social workers have been reprimanded, or questioned, for statements they made online. That being said, managers are not the only potentially risky members. Indeed, participants confided that it has happened that other social workers take screenshots of posts or comments and report them to employers so that the social worker in question is sanctioned.

“And then there’s the fact that people often take screenshots and send them to the professional order or your employer. I actually got in trouble with my employers because of posts I made in a group. Early in my career, I had made some memes that were critical of the lean approach. Some people took screenshots from the page and sent them to my bosses, and I got called in (translated from french)” (8).

Although these cases do not seem frequent, the source of fear is therefore no longer just the boss observing from their office, but also colleagues, those in whom they thought they could trust. Furthermore, some participants mentioned not wanting to participate in debates or comment on the practices of another social worker because such discussions often lead to tensions. This can sometimes lead to a very clear binary separation between what can be considered as "good" social work practice and what cannot. It could therefore be easy to be considered a "bad" social worker if one's practice does not follow that of the majority. These risks have thus led our participants to exercise caution in what they say and react to on these groups.

## **4.2 Prudence strategies**

The second element of analysis refers to the strategies put in place to exercise prudence on these groups, regardless of the motivation behind it. These strategies involve either a form of managing the use of the application or platform, or paying particular attention to one's own behaviors on these groups.

### *4.2.1 Platform management*

The first strategies mentioned by the participants are those directly related to managing settings on the social networking platform's application or platform. For example, some mentioned that when they feel they receive too many notifications from the group, they simply adjust the group's settings in the application to stop receiving them. The same goes for posts in their news feed; if they feel overwhelmed by group posts, they will simply unsubscribe while remaining a member and can view the posts when they feel like it. They can, of course, re-subscribe later if they wish. This kind of strategy helps to limit the risk of informational or emotional overload due to negative posts during especially active periods on these groups, such as the license renewal month or media coverage of particular events.

#### 4.2.2 Self-management

The second group of strategies mentioned by the participants referred to modifying their behaviors to limit risks, either for their psychological well-being or their professional life. For example, many mentioned avoiding participating in discussions on sensitive or more political topics.

“I’ve never been someone who posts a lot, because I’m kind of scared of getting attacked. Like, someone who puts something out there—I’m afraid what I write might not be right and that people will go after me or it’ll start a whole debate. I don’t feel like fueling that. I know people who are really good at it—they even add sources and educate others on different perspectives... But it takes time. It’s a lot of work to do that (translated from french)” (1)

Liking a post was also not considered, as it still publicly indicates a stance on the content. Thus, most participants said they greatly limit their active participation in groups, except when it comes to sharing resources or responding to more neutral questions. Note that even if their active participation is reduced, they still take the time to read and reflect on sensitive and/or political posts to form their own opinions. Critical thinking is generally present, even if it is not expressed in writing in the public space. Moreover, to avoid pitfalls and possible professional sanctions, some participants mentioned that they pay particular attention to not perceiving these groups as safe spaces. With the high number of members and the fact that they cannot know all of them, it is impossible for them to trust them all enough to discuss personal matters. Thus, by not considering the group as a "safe space," they avoid discussing topics they would not discuss with strangers. These two forms of prudence strategies represent the entirety of what was reported by the participants. Of course, it is impossible to assert that all members of these groups are prudent, as many still publish content on these groups. They simply did not participate in this project.

### 4.3 Discussion - Insights from research on the concept of prudence

#### 4.3.1 Online surveillance as a form of control

As previously noted, several participants mentioned exercising caution in their online interactions due to perceived scrutiny from their peers or prospective employers. Lewis (2018) posits that the emergence of the Internet and various social media platforms has introduced a novel mode of surveillance. He further contends that this surveillance has become almost normalized in online spaces, leading users to adjust their behaviors accordingly. However, Lewis (2018) also suggests that such surveillance is not inherently negative; rather, it can serve as a mechanism for regulating interactions to mitigate potential deviations and undesirable behaviors among users. As echoed by our interviewees, the sense of being under observation by other group members prompts them to self-regulate their participation and carefully consider their expressions, given that such content is accessible to all members.

Concerning the aspect of online surveillance by employers, Paré and Smith (2023) observe a growing number of legal cases where employers litigate against employees for statements made online. Thus, the apprehension expressed by our participants was not unfounded. Some employers may initiate legal action, or become subject to it by their employees, if the latter face repercussions for online statements, whether on personal or professional accounts, that could adversely affect the organization they represent (Paré & Smith, 2023). According to these scholars, the crux of the issue lies in the realm of freedom of expression. Fear of facing professional repercussions compels employees to exercise self-censorship not only within the confines of their workplace but also in their online presence. In the digital sphere, the delineation between professional and personal realms becomes increasingly blurred, paralleled by a nuanced understanding of freedom of expression.

#### 4.3.2 A Space for knowledge sharing?

Pi and collaborators (2013) posit that online communities have emerged as significant platforms for knowledge dissemination. Users of social networking sites increasingly join groups with diverse themes and objectives to access information, seek answers to their questions, find support, and acquire tools. In Québec, these groups are numerous and take various forms, such as Intervention psychosociale au

Québec, Version 2.0 Partage d'outils en intervention psychosociale, or T.S Québec : indignations et solutions. However, this knowledge-sharing process is not automatic. Pi et al. (2013) explain that group culture profoundly influences this behavior. Thus, the more a group's culture emphasizes knowledge sharing, the more inclined its members are to share their expertise. Furthermore, the authors suggest that members are even more motivated to engage in such sharing if they believe their contributions will be valuable to others (Pi et al., 2013).

This could elucidate why most participants indicated that they do not primarily seek information on these platforms but rather aim to contribute their own assistance and knowledge to fellow social workers with questions. However, none of them mentioned being mindful of the accuracy of the information they encounter online. Nevertheless, it appears that the social workers we interviewed are more inclined to assist their colleagues than to seek information for themselves.

#### 4.3.3 *A matter of prudence for clients*

Finally, we were surprised that none of the participants mentioned being cautious about the information they disclose online regarding their clients. While some mentioned using these groups to seek help with specific cases, sometimes considering it a form of clinical supervision, none mentioned paying particular attention to the confidentiality issues of their clients. This does not mean, of course, that they disclose personal information about their clients online, but it is interesting to note that none mentioned this type of prudence, although it is well-explored in the scientific literature. Indeed, Voshel and Wesala (2015) suggest that many social work students discuss experiences with clients in their internship settings on social networking sites, and our observations of publications demonstrate that this behavior also extends to practicing social workers in the field. While sharing reflections and posing questions about a specific case may improve practice and find better solutions for the client, this practice carries risks. Even if the user does not name the client, there is always a risk of recognition. Thus, such publications can lead to severe professional consequences and harm the professional reputation of the social worker and their workplace (Voshel & Wesala, 2015).

Another element not mentioned in the interviews is caution regarding the use of SNSs to gather information about clients, colleagues, or future colleagues (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019). This involves using groups or search engines on SNSs to observe what a client or colleague posts, shares, or comments on during their personal time. This type of behavior raises numerous ethical issues regarding privacy. With easy access to personal information on social networks, it could be tempting for a social worker to obtain information or follow the activities of their clients. Some beneficiaries may post content that is accessible to their social worker without even realizing it (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019). What if they discover that the client is lying about problematic behavior? What if the client is saying bad things about his social worker online? Or what if they have mutual friends? Some clients can even ask their social worker to look at some pictures or publications they made on Facebook (Byrne & Kirwan, 2029). Thus, the boundaries between personal and professional life would become even more blurred (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). On another note, what if a client finds their personal profile and wants to connect with them? How to manage the worker/client relationship online? Reamer (2023) here raises the risk that the client has access to very personal information about their worker, which may disturb the relationship. Although the reflex would be to reject any contact requests from clients (current or former), the social worker must be prepared for the possibility that the client may feel rejected (Reamer, 2023). Thus, social workers must consider, from their professional training, how to present their profile online (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). For example, several of our participants mentioned changing their name on their profile so that they could not be easily found. Voshel and Wesala (2015) also stress that it is important to remember that social workers are never truly "off duty"; they must report certain behaviors to authorities. That being said, the notion of caution regarding the ease with which a client can be found, or oneself found, was not mentioned by the participants. Perhaps because it is not directly related to the use of specific groups in social work, or simply because they do not engage in such practices.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, we can assert that social workers primarily use Facebook groups outside of working hours to connect with colleagues from across Quebec. This research has also shown us that the majority of posts made by social workers focus on the subject of professional practice, whether it be asking practical questions or sharing relevant tools and information. Regarding the second objective of this article, which is to understand the meaning behind the use of peer exchange groups on SNSs for social workers, we can advance that the meaning pursued by social workers lies within the three action logics of Jauréguiberry and Proulx (2011). Indeed, our results have demonstrated that social workers use these groups for integration purposes (joining a community of belonging), utilitarian purposes (finding tools, improving practice), as well as for subjectivation purposes (questioning their practices and reflecting on their position as social workers). Another pertinent element reported by social workers is the aspect of prudence in their online interactions with their peers. The analysis of commented visits with the participants allowed us to develop a typology of prudence, presenting on one side the risks, namely those for psychological health and those for professional careers, and on the other side the strategies to limit these risks, namely those related to platform management or management of one's own behaviors. In this sense, we believe that this aspect of prudence deserves further exploration.

That being said, several other angles of analysis seem interesting for future research. For example, it would be relevant to question managers and employers about their presence on such groups. We could inquire about their perception of these groups and confirm, or not, the fears of the social workers we met. Furthermore, it would also seem important to examine the professional skills to develop regarding the use of SNSs and social work. Should it be given special consideration in training? What issues should be addressed? What skills need to be acquired? And is it necessary to evaluate them?

### 5.1 Risks and limitations of the research

The greatest risk we observed was that of researcher over-involvement, as recruitment was conducted using her personal accounts on various platforms. Thus, she quickly found herself receiving responses on her mobile phone at all hours of the day. She could have turned off notifications for these applications, but that would have also prevented those related to her personal life. Moreover, we note two limitations related to this research. The first is the difficulty in recruiting participants. Despite postings on three platforms, on dozens of pages and groups, and emails sent, we were only able to recruit 14 participants. Finally, we sometimes found it challenging to work with the search engines of the Facebook platform, which sometimes omitted certain results during commented visits.

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